

## At Whose Hand A Deer Dies

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# **At Whose Hand A Deer Dies**

by [AquitaineQueen24](#)

## Summary

'I didn't understand before, but I do now.

You cannot claim what was not given to you.

The Stag chose ME.'

And Morozova's Stag declares its choice far sooner, adorning her brows and not her breast, tearing at his plots.

# Chapter 1

## Chapter Notes

The title for this was taken from a Chinese proverb about the difficulty of predicting the future, that can be roughly translated as "You never know at whose hand a deer will die."

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

In all the many eventful days that come after, this is what Alina remembers of the terrible moments in the clearing before she dropped her barrier. When she spoke to the stag and looked it in the eye as she made her choice, owing it that much:

‘I’m sorry. I led them to you. I *can’t* lose him. I shouldn’t have wanted this. I’m so sorry.’

She remembers that she sank her face into the stag’s fur as she prepared to run to Mal.

If anyone ever asked, this is how Alina might describe the stag’s reply. For yes, it *did* reply:

You are sorry, aren’t you.

I am ready. Not that I want to go, but I will.

You understood then.

You understand now?

When you let the dark in, stay *well* away from my head, but keep by my flank.

Wait for him to kill me.

(I didn't want this, Alina did not say out.)

You *owe* me this. Little one.

Stay by my side as I die.

Be with me.

Take it all.

---

And Ivan, listening to

the Otkazat'sya tracker's weak heart whining each time it pumps more of his blood out onto the snow

Dimitri's patter as he calms himself down from the blow of the tracker's bullet right in his chest

Zoya's steady beat as she guards her face, waiting for any new attack on Starkov's part,

the General's roaring excitement as he prepares to make the Cut, even while his breath never so much as falters,

Kostyk's fool heart drumming like a scared rabbit, the Durast dreads any chance of a fight or getting hurt again,

the gallop of Starkov as she strains for more of her power against the General, in vain,

the great pounding of the stag's mighty struggle,

Ivan hears Starkov's heart slowing and the beast's heart quieting. In an instant they match and are in time, they're so loud that surely the General can hear them! Something has gone wrong and

the light disappears and he hears the Cut *slice* through the night, terrible and too fast, wait sir *wait*

Ivan moves his hands too late

---

while Zoya shields her face but feels the throbbing heat of Starkov's shield even through her glove, roiling the air about her like she's stepped out from a shadowed house into the full heat and bright of the day

and in her gut she feels a certain churning dislike at what's playing out before them, nothing that she'd anticipated when they planned this back in the camp; not leaving the tracker bleeding out in the snow like a stuck pig, not Kirigan forcing such a choice on Starkov, this isn't right,

she feels suddenly the barrier's warmth *go* and the light fails, sucked away like the sun being blocked out by masses of clouds,

which is fitting, for Zoya also feels a pressure coming down upon them, air thick and clinging, it's the weight of an approaching storm.

She would tell Kirigan. She's about to, when the passage of the Cut splits the night like a thunderclap. The air is sharp and dangerous.

Did Kirigan hit the stag? Is it over? Starkov's light has quite faded, Zoya must squint to see what's happened

---

but David stayed safe behind the General during Starkov's last stand because, after all, he's a Durast and not a fighter. Thus while the others are still blinking to see what the General has done, David sees:

First, that the stag's head is quite separated from its body, and also from several of its antlers.

Second, that Alina Starkov is lying near but not next to the stag's body, on her side, not moving, seeming quite stunned.

Kirigan says something quite loud. What he says, precisely, David isn't sure, since he must get closer now the stag is dead and Alina Starkov is not likely to broil him, in order to observe and obtain the antlers.

Which are wrong. Something's wrong.

David doesn't want to touch the nearest enormous antler that's still attached to the stag's head, in case the head should move with it. He picks up one severed piece from the snow and, while before he could feel the power radiating out from it like Alina Starkov's own Small Science, there's nothing now.

No power.

They're just bits of bone.

So. Where did it go?

David tries to think what to say to the General and tries not to think of what the General will do, when right then Alina Starkov gasps like she's about to vomit.

He probably should be comforting her, shouldn't he? It's the thing one should do. Genya would do it. Only he has an idea she wouldn't like it and might get angry at him. Even blind him like that guard. He'd better stay back.

David steps wide around Alina Starkov while she wriggles in the snow and stares at her hands. She looks like she's never seen her fingers before and isn't sure what they're doing in front of her, or on the ends of her arms.

A noise from behind David and Alina looks *not* at him, thank Saints, he couldn't have borne it if she looked at him that way. She blinks

saints

her *eyes*

---

This is what Mal can recall, of what happened when Alina's light vanished:

Something loud, cutting the night in two.

In the middle of it all, another burp of blood and he was certain that *this* was the end.

When the blood hit the snow, the surprise that he still lived.

The bizarre moment when he was two Mals; the one swimming in wet spiking pain, trying to not to sink, and the one in the back of his brain crying *Don't struggle, don't breathe deep, Alina Alina!*

The darkness pouring in and, when he peered through it, seeing Alina's bloody face with her cheek pressed against the ground. Looking toward him but not at him.

Bloody face, open mouth and empty eyes. Dead. Dead dead dead.

Falling to the snow, giving up. Only wanting it to end. Finished.

Hearing her cough.

Managing to look up in time to see her hands twist and jerk.

Trying to swim against the pain to get to her, even just far enough to touch her trembling fingers.

Falling.

Lying there and knowing death was coming, nothing left in him to stop it.

But Alina was alive.



Watching her trying to get up as if she'd forgotten how to do it. Watching her stare at her hands as if she didn't know what they were.

She spotted him. She didn't even know him.

The white blaze of fear that shot throughout him, what had happened?

(This he remembers the most. Fearing not Alina but whatever made her *look* at him like that, with those eyes, like he was something to be eaten or trampled.)

And the moment where she knew him again. Crying not his name but for him anyway, staying on her feet at last however much she wobbled.

To die, seeing Alina trying to get to him!

That Heartrender seizing her, hearing her scream like the stag did. When it was shot.

Being pulled hard up off his front, up from the snow and his blood, dumped on his back and seeing only white and black suns. Forever swallowing each other.

This time it must be the end.

---

This is what Aleksander knows:

He – does not know quite what has just happened. But this is no time for raging, not in front of his Grisha. He can solve this. Yes, even this! This is not the end.

What to do now? Confused subordinates. A distraught David nearly wringing his hands over useless *powerless* antlers, Ivan and Zoya looking to him for some, *any* decision, the tracker somehow still alive, and Alina

wrestling in Ivan's grasp and bleeding freely from her left temple, where did the wound come from? Alina looking from the tracker to him and back, ready to kick out at him if he gets close enough.

David said something about her eyes. Aleksander had thought she might have somehow blinded herself, just to make a perfect finish to this night, and yet her eyes are as dark as always. She clearly sees all of them, and hates him.

When she shakes her head and blinks, *now* he knows what David meant. In this darkness the sight of her eyes makes his Grisha start and murmur.

Aleksander knows better. He knows very well the look of certain depths, shapes and colours when smothered in shadow. These eyes are not pure black. It is merely the iris filling the whole eye - when that space isn't taken up by a pupil, horizontal and huge as it tries *so* hard to see, greedy for any light. Fitting for a creature on a desperate lookout for its killers. He knows in the sun these eyes will be molten brown, even golden.

Aleksander grasps and holds at the fragments of plans. Take them apart for their pieces, bring the best aspects back into play when the time is right. First, heal the tracker. Back to camp to see what can be done.

He hasn't lost the stag. He knows exactly where it is.

## Chapter End Notes

Dimitri is the Healer in 'The Unsea' who shot Mal in the back with an arrow, and then healed him on Kirigan's order; and later is dismissive towards Zoya in 'No Mourners'. I didn't know his name in the series, so I gave him one here!



# David I, Alina I

## Chapter Summary

David has some bad news for Kirigan. Alina gets some even worse news, and an unexpected boon.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Now that Alina Starkov's eyes appear to have settled back to their normal human state

(although, are they the same colour as before? David can't recall from the first time they met)

he finds that he wants to see them change again, clearly. How does it *work*? It happens when she blinks; does it require the absence of light, or could she do it while her eyes are still open? Is she in control of it at all, like Miss Safin? Does she do it the way Miss Safin does, calling upon the colour aspects of flowers and jewels? That could be such a marvellous thing, if the fragment granted her Materialnik abilities! Though she'd never be as good as Genya.

No. Fragment. Checking. It's why he's here, stay focused. The General will be irritated if he takes too long.

It is so hard to avoid Miss Starkov's eyes. By necessity he can't look at anything other than her temple, and she *will* keep moving her head and *looking* at him. It's worse than the usual stares, like a finger poking his cheek, a prod, a push. He catches the hint of her eye at the edge of his sight, he has to move his own head, and then *she* moves.

Metal doesn't move unless he desires it, even bone at least stays put. So much easier.

'Please, could you keep still?'

‘Why *should* I?’

‘Well.’ David tries to think why exactly she *should*, a reason that she’d actually agree to. It is a bit much to ask, after everything else that’s happened tonight. ‘Because then I’ll be finished quicker?’

Miss Starkov breathes in hard through her nose, but after that she does keep still. And also stops looking at him. Much better.

Now he finds it, the trace of the signature of the antler. Incredible! How has it managed to distribute itself to such a wide area, after entering at the point in her temple, *without* harming her? How did she manage it? All the amplifiers he’s ever read of or spotted, they’re only ever partially accepted into the skin, not fully absorbed! A full absorption. Might mean the power gained from the fragment, even if it’s only a fragment, will be even greater if the effect is spreading throughout her body rather than concentrated in one area! A full acceptance!

‘Well, David?’

The General is waiting, he must hurry and finish. What did the General want? To know if the fragment was there, if it was a danger, and whether it can be removed. Right. He knows the answers to two of those things, it’s unclear how he can discover anything about the third. He should stop for now.

David lets his power go and gets to his feet. Will Ivan let Miss Starkov go now? It’s as if the Heartrender’s trying to bind her elbows behind her back. That shouldn’t have happened, he doesn’t like it. He might not have been holding her, but he’s the reason she’s being hurt.

Ivan does let Alina go once David’s stepped back far enough. Very quickly she gets off her knees and plants her backside on the floor, which does look like a far more comfortable way of sitting. She looks up at him again as if she now wants to grasp him and pull him back.

‘What were you doing?’

The General told him to say nothing to her about it. But, he should say something. He has to. She's scared and it's his fault. 'Making sure you're all right. And you are.'

David feels her eyes on his back, prodding and tapping, as he goes to the General.

He's about to speak when Kirigan raises his hand; 'Quiet, David, remember.'

Yes, he does get too loud when he's excited, he remembers. Must be quiet. No one likes it when he's loud, and Miss Starkov must not know. 'You were right, sir. A fragment of the stag's antler was somehow embedded in Miss Starkov's temple, and her flesh accepted and closed over it.'

'Can it be removed?'

'No. It seems to have distributed itself somehow throughout her flesh and skull. I don't believe it's possible to remove it in any great percentage.'

The General looks out into the night. 'The same would go for destroying it, I presume.'

Why would he want *that*? 'Yes, sir. That actually might well be dangerous to Miss Starkov.'

'And the other pieces?'

'I can shape them as you see fit, but I don't believe it would make any difference. The stag's power is within Miss Starkov, now. I really don't know of anything that would remove it.'

The General watches the night. David waits and turns the small piece of antler intended for the General's hand over and over between his fingers. All those designs for the main amplifier and how it might best sit and fit around her neck, they're *wasted* now. Now he'll never know if it could have been done.

But.

He thinks of Miss Starkov with her hands still trapped, while he settles the prongs of the collar on her shoulders. Before tonight he thought she'd be so happy to accept the General's gift to her, but what if it had happened tonight, the fragment hadn't entered her, if all had gone as planned with his own crafting?

What would it have been *like* when the antlers went into her flesh? He's never seen someone claim an amplifier before. What would it be like for someone else to do it *to* her? Would it have hurt her?

'David.' The General's looking at him, has he been waiting to be noticed? 'Can you sense the trace in her, from here?'

Yes, sir.'

'Then give me the antler piece for my hand.'

But, it won't work. Does the General not understand that it won't work? Did David explain it wrong? The General's looking at him. So, he places the piece of antler on the back of the General's hand, he feels for the trace in Alina Starkov far away and close to the floor, it would be better if she were closer but with *this* antler fragment under his fingers he'd still feel it up to a mile away. And anyway, even if he were touching her temple again it *still* wouldn't work.

He does try. If the General asks him later, he can say that he did at least try. There's the antler under his left hand pressing down into the General's flesh

(it does seem to hurt the General. remember this. it could be important)

and the feel of Alina Starkov's power on his right, it feels like warm sunlight dappling his fingers through the windows, or focused through his work loupe

or like fur, not near as soft as the General's cloak collar looks; coarser, long and beneath it the animal warmth of something ready to move, to run or fight.

The circle of antler meets the bones of the General's hand. It's done, even if it didn't work.

David is very glad it didn't work. How much better it is for Alina to have control over her light, than for the General to control it for her.

---

There is no bear in here with them. With her. There is no giant predator

(tiger, it's a tiger, I saw it in a book)

prowling outside in the night. There are only three men, that's bad enough. There is no bear. Alina is not going mad or addled. No matter what that blow did to her head. Anyway, it's been healed.

Trying to see whatever David and Kirigan are doing over by the opening way hurts her eyes. It sends twinges through her head. With a little manoeuvring she can feel at the spot where the blow landed again, picking at the dry blood that's plastering her hair to her scalp.

She rests her forearms on her knees. She's grounded and less likely to be knocked prone. She'll still be looking up at Kirigan and still next to helpless, but far less penitent.

David finishes his work and moves away from Kirigan - who, still never taking his eyes off her, raises his hand to clench and flex his fingers, to show off his amplifier as if it'll impress her.



‘I hope that hurt. I hope the stag *haunts* you.’

He laughs. He *laughs!* ‘I rather doubt it.’

‘Murderer.’

Now that hits very close; all the humour goes. ‘Be careful. Remember whose life is in your hands.’

So, that’s how he’ll play it. She sacrificed the stag, and it won’t even save Mal! ‘You said you would let him go.’

‘I said I would have my Healer save him.’

‘Fine. You’ve done that. What will you do with us now?’

‘What *should* I do with a First Army deserter, and a defecting Grisha?’

As if she has any choice, or any influence on whatever he decides to do with them! She twists her wrists to show him her empty palms, wriggling her fingers. ‘Defecting Sun Summoner, or have I lost the right to that? And it’s hardly up to me. Is it? It never has been.’

Kirigan comes closer, actually lowering himself down to meet her. No to *that*, he can stay far away from her! She tries to shift back, but there’s no way to support herself without either putting both hands to one side, or nearly falling back against Ivan. Back into the bear’s clutches. There *is* no bear!

‘It should not be like this. Why should there be war between us, Alina? The only thing more powerful than you, or I, is the two of us together.’

He already needs a reminder? This time she raises her arms until the shackle bolt is level with her eyes, until she can't see his eyes for the metal. If she could summon her power she'd have two suns to send right into those dark pools. She'd drive away his shadows and burn out the fragment in his hand, the trophy he tried to claim. He didn't even collect it himself!

‘What would you have me do, Alina-’

‘I'd have that piece of antler right back out of your hand; you don't deserve it.’ That manages to prick at him too, she's sure his teeth have clenched. Strike again while he is shocked from this blow, don't give him time to muster an attack. ‘I'd have you restore the stag to life. I 'd have you let us all go, and leave us alone. But since that's impossible-’

‘*When* you had your liberty, you ran from me. From all of us. Did you ever stop to *think* what your disappearance would mean to the Little Palace?’

Ivan breathes deep and angry behind her, the bear growls. It's not a bear, stop it!

‘I don't want this. But if this is how I must preserve our unity, until you come to your senses, I will shackle you if it is necessary. If that is what I must do to protect you.’

‘This only protects *you!*’ The shackles cut, they bite, her wrists feel too big for them to hold, her skin feels too small. There's something beating in her temple, a pain the Healer didn't catch.

‘No, Alina. I swore I would be by your side, to defend you, and that has not changed. It never will. Even if you take it into your head to charge headfirst into danger.’

‘I was *fleeing* from danger.’

Kirigan sits back on his heels and watches her. He waits for her to start and he'll be chasing after her, snapping at her soft spots to bring her down. 'I told you that our enemies were threatened by you. You've barely escaped one assassin and you would roam wild throughout Ravka, drawing further knives for your throat.'

Careful, she needs to be careful, don't slow for him to get his teeth in. When will the pounding stop? 'What are you talking about?'

He sighs, he looks down. 'The night of the winter fete. When I was called away.' So coyly referring to their little clutch and fumble. Bastard. 'Ivan had brought me word of an assassination attempt in the fitting room. Marie was attacked by a West Ravkan assassin. Her throat was slit. She died on the spot.'

It's very cold. 'You're lying. This.' She can't feel her hands. 'This is, it's not true.'

'You think he would lie, about an attempt upon your life?' Ivan is harsh, the bear growls.

'It's true.' David over by the tables, looking direct at her. 'It is true.'

'No.'

David, nodding so many times, 'It *is*. A man disguised himself as one of the Oprichniki, and broke into the fitting room. Miss Safin was hurt. Miss Marie was killed.'

Not true. Not real. Can't be.

'She died for you, and you ran.' Kirigan, glaring at her. 'A poor way to repay her sacrifice.'

Marie. It's stupid. Stupid! She's fine. She was fine. They got dressed together that evening, wasn't that long ago. Chatted when they were buttoned up in their *keftas*. Marie's fine. She

can't be dead. How can she be dead? She was alive. She'd laughed, she'd blown out that veil just like Alina did the first day.

Can't even hide her face, so they won't see her crying! For the stag too, why should it matter so much, it was just an animal, Marie had so much before her! But it does matter! Dead because of her, oh, *Oh.*

Was Marie afraid as well? Did she suffer too? Did she die slow, helpless, knowing death was coming while she struggled and cried?

*I was ready, remember? I didn't want to go*

Don't. Don't follow it. Dead and it's her fault! There's a bear behind them and their killer before them, wearing their bones like he's earned them.

*But I did go, for you, with you.*

Her eyes will burn up if she opens them now. Her head's going to split *open*.

Something gets her by the shoulders, it has her, she can't move. He has her. Everything becomes soft in that dark fur on his shoulder, catching up her tears and soothing her eyelids. Just for a moment. Just to hide.

'We *cannot* let her death be in vain, Alina. There will be others like Marie, thousands, if we do not act. We must cross the Fold. And to do that, we must be united, in appearance and in purpose.'

She can't rise and show her face, she can't breathe, can't see.

*You can cry. You must cry. You must mourn. You have been hurt so quickly and deeply in so many places, it is right to feel it. You are alive when she is not, when I am not, and you have*

*been turned upon and you are in pain. You are alive. You must feel it. Let go.*

Kirigan, the killer, he's stroking her hair. It is so gentle. He never once catches or tugs despite everything. His palm is warm and heavy on her hair. On her left temple.

Alina finds both her hands in their stock bar and shoves her killer hard in his chest. He only comes back stronger. Both his hands are about her head! If he closes them, he'll crush her!

Light. He's taken away her hands but *he's touching her*. He wears her antlers but she can have his bones and blood, living amplifier. Summon the light, before he realises! *Come*.

This time it's not blazing, not blooming and caressing, not this time, not here. It comes as a gale rushing through her, like she's a mountain pass or a barren plain, tearing at her sides in its passage, the wind burning flesh surely as the sun does, whipping through her antlers to break them like branches and slicing her fur to find her skin and burn that too

too much it's too much she'll *burn*

*Here. You are yourself. You are exactly yourself.*

Something not herself *squeezes* inside Alina. It might be some tap of the power being shut fast. Or it's merely her heart, how curious to feel it slowing. Ivan, the bear protecting his master. *Unfair*. Who is there to protect her and Mal from the monster?

With her light going, it's hard to see in here. Has she blasted everything around her away like an Inferni losing control, or a Fjerdan cannon? No, there are the shapes of the tables, hints of things undisturbed, David hunched by the wall but not seeming in pain. It's just the dark that makes it difficult to make out things. Just her eyes.

And Kirigan, there he is, face red and blistered. His wide eyes still fixed on her and they're narrowed but they still work? Is there *nothing* that will blind him for even a moment?

Alina shoves her hands upwards. Take the shackle bar to his throat, see if that will choke him! He has her wrist in his grip at once - ah. Only her right wrist in his left hand, his right hand is red and curled like a dead spider.

‘Oh, Alina,’ he says all rasping and dry, all while his stolen, ill-gotten piece of antler does nothing.

Does he know. Does David, who checked the blow she took when the stag died, who put the antler into Kirigan’s hand, know? For she knows. *We know.*

## Chapter End Notes

\*carries Darkling/Kirigan into Plato's Academy like a drenched cat, shouting 'Behold, a manipulative bastard!!!'

Also, Kirigan still tries to see if his leash will work (despite David telling him it definitely won't). It's not very effective. You need to listen to the Durast all the time, Kirigan, not just to the bits that benefit you!

# Aleksander I

## Chapter Summary

Kirigan really should have listened to David. No matter; he's a quick study and a quicker plotter.

## Chapter Notes

I've rewritten the ending of Chapter 2 very slightly, to match this one. So it turns out Kirigan didn't quite escape Alina's blaze of light unscathed. Huzzah.

Very brief, blink-and-you'll-miss-it spoilers for 'The Demon in the Wood' and 'King of Scars', which shall be expanded upon at the end!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When Alina's light is dying, before he can see her face again, the thorns of her antlers dart to and fro across his sight.

In taking stock of his hurts Aleksander finds that his right hand is a mass of pain, with the skin near gone from his palm and fingers and the antler fragment near ready to slide off his bones. Even with the protection of his shadows, what damage has she done to his eyes! His face and neck are throbbing from her blaze; they promise deeper agonies if left untended.

Thus, the first blows anyone has managed to lay on him in a long while: a scorched hand, a poisoned face and neck and a myriad of suns blurring his vision. All the suns he could ever want.

A lesson here: *always listen to the Durast.*

Over her head he can meet Ivan's eyes - watering, straining but still there, not burned out as she did to that Otkazat'sya. Ivan still sees! At the edge of his blurry vision there's more

movement that turns into David, curled into himself behind the table. If Ivan struggled in Alina's searing blast, has this soft boy survived?

When Aleksander calls for him, the boy's face comes out of hiding... whole, and unharmed. He sees them. Alina was able to restrain herself there as well.

Alina's skin glows still and hurts his eyes. *Her* eyes now have two sets of irises and pupils. Aleksander watches as the larger are drained and eclipsed by the lesser, the black devouring and swallowing the golden brown. She only blinks once the black has triumphed.

He has to work up the spit to swallow and loosen his parched throat, as if he'd been walking through the wastes outside the Fold for days and nights with no water. 'David, I find that I have no more need for your services tonight. You may leave.'

The boy nearly scrambles out on his hands and knees, before he remembers himself and the snow and gets to his feet for the night outside.

Does he need Ivan for this? Alina won't be getting any further gulps of his power, and he has her hands fully secured. He's embarrassed, yet he's learned a sharp lesson. 'Ivan, you may leave us too.'

*'Moi soverenyi!'* How satisfying to hear Ivan's dismay, his reluctance to leave. Faithful Ivan has risked blindness in his service, has helped him quell a furious woman halfway to sainthood, and still he refuses to run to safety!

'I must have further words with Miss Starkov. But all will be well.' And, when dutiful Ivan moves to go but lingers from that same duty, Aleksander throws him a sop of 'I will summon you, should I have need.'

So Aleksander is left crouched nearly between the legs of Alina Starkov, a girl in shackles and not some icon or portrait of martyrdom with antlers bursting from her head. That, at least for now, was merely a mad delusion brought on by a burst of hot light full in his face. Bad enough that the eyes have remerged, that they will probably continue to do so.



What a sick joke it's become. His grandfather's Stag joining with his wayward Sun Summoner, both defiant. Baghra will laugh herself into fits when she learns of this. At least she'll never see it.

Aleksander pushes himself to get up on his knees, to bring his height back into the matter. He works for the spit to speak again.

'Curious,' he offers.

Alina snorts, so heavy for such a human breath, so much weight. 'Yes?'

'How have you managed this? *I* killed the stag.'

Her nostrils flare, her eyes lighten – it's not quite enough for the stag to come bursting through again. 'So? You can't claim something that wasn't given to you.'

And she laughs. Nearly on her back, no spark for her light despite all her new fuel, her hands pinioned, furious and afraid, Alina *laughs* enough to make his traitor heart squeeze tight. 'The stag chose *me*.'

Not a lie, not even a belief. She knows this, she's certain of it. Ridiculous, childish, delusion brought on by the blow to her head, it still persists.

The stag chose, it chose her, the beasts can choose.

*Why?* What animal, hunted and frantic, cornered

*(crying begging freezing drowning in a lake)*

would willingly gift its power to its killer? It's a cheat, a trick! An amplifier is won in battle. Ivan had the claws off his bear, Zoya battled with her tiger, Juris killed his dragon.

*ah*

Juris. Sankt Juris with his shifting eyes, Juris with his shifting forms. Juris, with his dragon?

That's how this is played? Alina showed the creature a little tenderness, a touch of mercy; then she chose to betray it for her tracker, and it chose *her* in return?

Master it. Bear it. It is what it is, and he can turn it to his own hand. He's faced a dragon before; a stag should be simple. If he reaches for her now, will she bear his touch or keep her distance?

*ah*

She's too quick! Her nails dig and set his palm afire once more, with not even the decency on her part to look appalled at the mess she's made of him! Her fingers still have strength to hold his hand and turn it over to see the back, the less cooked half, the blackened antler piece.

If she hoped to catch him off guard and summon from him again, she'll need to be satisfied by how touching the piece hurts him. Prodding it with her thumb while she watches his face, trying to catch him flinching. 'You tried something with this piece. Even when you already knew the stag was mine.'

'Perhaps.' How much longer will she hold him? When will she ever willingly do it again after this moment?

'What were you planning?'

There is a scent of damp between them, of living wet fur. He grabs the bar holding the manacles to hold *her*, just as she realises and starts to fight again. ‘You *bastard*.’ Her eyes grow lighter – it’s merely from the glow of the lamp above.

‘You asked for this yourself, when we met. To transfer your gift to someone who could use it.’

‘Don’t you *dare* try to pull that shit on me!’ Such a mouth she suddenly has, the soldier finally emerging! ‘This isn’t what I meant. And I *can* control it now.’

‘Can you?’ Yes, that stops her. ‘I felt it too, Alina. A gale, a storm rushing through you. The stag’s given you such power, but it’s a dangerous gift. If I hadn’t damped your fuel, if Ivan hadn’t been able to slow your heart, what would you have done?’

And that shakes her. But with teeth bared, she tells him ‘I would have burned you *black*.’

Oh, *would* she? The stag might. Payment for its severed head. Could Alina do it?

‘And then you would have found some way to escape, along with your tracker? Journey to the Fold and tear it all down?’

Aleksander’s had it with the distraction of every ache and pain that she’s inflicted. He’s proven his point, let’s prove another. He’ll reach down past the well of his shadows, down the long disused route to the heart of the world, he’ll scoop up the cold of *merzost*.

*Up!*

It wells and seeps and clambers. It burns like the permafrost, white flame rooting out whatever Alina’s blaze left behind. It scrapes over and under his face to tend the healthy spots and rip out the poison patches her light planted in him. No more than a brief stab in his eyes, so he was quick enough to save them; it’s the bonfire in his hand that has his eyelids squeezed shut. The blaze lasts, lasts, blessedly cools and stills. His hand’s returned.

What does he see when he opens his eyes, but Alina full of horror - lips twisted as if she were still sprawled on the forest floor, the Druskelle's blood still splashed across her face. *Now* she wants to run! Does she know it, did she recognise it? Is the stag urging her to flee, like knowing like, magic fearing magic, different chambers of the heart of the world at odds with each other?

'*There,*' more a sigh than a word. He has to fight the shakes growing in every muscle, in the *merzost's* wake. 'You see? And the Fold is far greater and more terrible than I am. Even with the stag in your veins, you're not powerful enough to destroy it.'

Horried, terrified, Alina still finds it in herself to get up onto one knee and bring her face closer to his. To say, 'Not powerful enough *yet.*'

When she tries to pull her hands away from him, Aleksander holds tight to the bar between them.

Even with the *merzost's* price drumming in his temples, Alina is the first to grow tired of their staring, unsteady and unable to use her hands for balance. Once she's seated with her legs crossed she asks him, 'What will you tell the king and queen, the Apparat? When you haul the Sun Summoner back in chains? And everyone in the Little Palace? Are you going to drag me around like a pet?'

He lets her raise her hand to touch her own temple, that cursed left temple, and tuck her hair out of her face. 'I could always tell them *why* you've imprisoned me. Why I fled. Unless you're planning on gagging me as well?'

Aleksander wants to cup her face in his hands and kiss away her rage. She'd bite his lips off for it, and she would be right in biting. He wants to bite *her* for being right!

What now? A more secure suite of rooms for her in the Little Palace, far away from curious eyes and soft hearts? A suitable isolated estate, until he can be certain no other parts of the stag will burst out into the world? Until she can come to understand how things *must* be? How long will that take? There's no time! Any threats towards her tracker will only make her more defiant and the stag stronger, and the boy can only die once. Even threats of pain

towards the boy would turn her further against him, and how ironic that at present Aleksander doesn't have centuries, years or even months.

So. So, so.

He sets her wrists down on her knees. He retreats to sit further off from her. He mimics her by resting his own forearms on his knees. He laces his fingers together. So gentle, so calm, so lulling. See? He is not a threat.

‘We shall tell them all the truth. That you were rescued from your abductors. You are *most* distressed by the attempt upon your life. To remedy this, you plan to make a pilgrimage across the Fold, to speak to our wayward brothers and sisters, and so heal the breach between the East and West.’

Alina, her face turned to her right hand but watching him out of the corner of her left eye, like a deer caught off their guard while grazing, she says, ‘And of course the Black General will be accompanying me. To keep me *quite* safe.’

‘That; and I’ve found that after all this excitement, I wish to see Novokribirsk. It’s been a long while since I was last there. I imagine it will be quite restful in comparison to this side of the Fold. And there is someone I need to see face to face. General Zlatan must be brought to account.’

She considers, she frowns, she decides to ask. ‘Why now? What has he done?’

Has she forgotten Marie already, for all her denial and weeping into his collar? Although he had only said *West Ravkan*. He might have meant any blade for hire from beyond the Fold.

For Aleksander it was a deep wound, but still long expected in the struggle between himself and Zlatan. For Alina, it will be a stab in the back. It’s pleasure and agony to say it. ‘Who do you think paid for your assassination?’

He hates the look of her so shaken, her fingers curling in preparation for a fight. He would put his arm about her shoulders and draw her in to cry on his shoulder, he would stroke her hair again. Would it truly be hair under his fingers, or wet fur?

Alina closes her eyes in shock, squeezes them tight as if she is the one summoning *merzost* now. Finally, she says ‘Without the Fold, East and West become one. And Zlatan wants independence.’

Her weary understanding summons rage enough to stop his breath. Like he’s back in that cellar with that miserable trafficker. She should know what price they put on her life. She doesn’t deserve to, she needs to. ‘He wants it so badly that he paid a million krugers for a man to slit your throat.’

Let her know that all of Ravka does not love her. Not even when she started to believe that she could save it. Let her know that one of Ravka’s best and most beloved sons, along with all the people who love him, hates her as much as he does the Black General. Let her finally understand.

Alina shivers. *Now* remembering poor Marie – or perhaps imagining the blade against her own little neck? Or is it the stag, recalling the edge of his Cut?

He presses on and slices deeper: ‘He won’t stop when he learns his assassin failed. He will marshal West Ravka and turn every one of them against you.’

Alina shakes her head. Not denying his words, though, not shaking them off. Her breath’s quickening with panic. ‘And you want to sail me into *Novokribirsk*, in full view of him?’

‘At my side. You should be able to look him in the eye and ask him how he *dared* to plot against you. You should have the chance to judge and sentence him.’

‘That’s.’ She sniffs. No doubt she’s furious that she can’t easily wipe her nose or mop up any tears. ‘How can I possibly do that?’

So reluctant. Unwilling to see how she can hold the power of life and death, even after she nearly burned his hand off! ‘Alina. Cross the Fold with me, come with me to Novokribirsk. Help me save Ravka from turning upon itself.’

And to that impassioned, earnest speech, what does she do but *sit back* and let her head fall to one side, as if waiting for him to offer her something better?

He can wait. He can also offer a lure. ‘And when we return to Os Alta, your tracker will have his liberty.’ Oh, she sits up for *that!* ‘I might even be able to convince the king to grant him a pardon for deserting the First Army, due to his integral part in quelling the rebellion in West Ravka.’

Aleksander considers his hands. Should he remove the piece of antler, or leave it for show? He meets her eyes again. ‘That is, of course, if we are able to cross and return safely.’

‘How’re you going to *quell* that rebellion? You can’t take the armies across the Fold, and you can’t use the Fold itself.’ Alina smiles with half her mouth, with only half. ‘Not without *me*.’

He wants to kiss and bite her for that as well. His clever darling one.

‘Not without you. But Zlatan and his movement must be dealt with, or soon all of West Ravka will be fighting to secede, handing over every Grisha it can find for execution. *Dissection*. Ravka will bleed, and our enemies will close in for the slaughter.’

He thinks that Alina is certainly judging and sentencing *him*, for all her protests. ‘You’ll let Mal go?’

‘Once we have journeyed across the Fold and back, he will be released.’

‘Alive, and unharmed?’

‘I will even have him patched up further, should he manage to collect any more war wounds.’

Alina digs her nails into her knees. Now's the time. Aleksander rises forward onto one knee again, leaning over her hands and shackles. She might think of closing the gap, smashing her forehead against his and breaking his nose, it still won't win her another *drop* of his power.

'Together, we can end this war before it begins. We can protect our own. Is that not what you want?'

Alina shakes her head once more, again not denying it; more as a deer would get rid of the flies. Her eyes are still dark when she looks at him and yet. And yet.

He imagines the antlers arrayed about and over her head, like a *kokoshnik* headdress. A crown.

## Chapter End Notes

So, we get to the reason why I wanted to write this story in the first place - because I read 'King of Scars', wherein a certain someone gained the power to turn into a dragon. And then ANOTHER certain person gains that ability from the first person.

Now, when I first read that, I thought 'That's really too daft, even for this universe.' But on the other hand, it was also absolutely epic. And then in the show the Stag literally appears to Alina in a vision and she realises that it specifically chose her, and she further absorbs the antlers into herself as a deeper and more intrinsic claiming of an amplifier, and it might just be that the two of them are the same, connected at the heart of creation, eh? EH???

Also I was enthralled by the idea of Alina with the eyes of a deer, and with antlers branching out about her head, like the headdress that Kirigan imagines.

Also also, I wonder what the Darkling, who was nearly murdered for his bones as a child, would think of Juris' battle and bonding with his 'true' amplifier. (Eric Theisser has mentioned that they were originally going to shoot that scene from 'The Demon in the Woods' but they didn't have the time, though I'm assuming that it's still canon for the show.)

I'm hoping that future chapters will take less time to arrive; this one took as long as it did because Kirigan simply could not decide what he wanted to do; and once he did



decide, he wasn't willing to just sit and talk. People, NEVER write chapters where the characters spend the entire time sitting on the carpet and arguing. It's not worth it.

# Zoya I

## Chapter Summary

Zoya is left in the dark and out in the cold.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Her *kefta*'s falling off her shoulder and already she can barely feel her fingers, but Zoya keeps the wind at bay as she heads around the main tent to its entrance. *Naturally*, Ivan is there to bar the way to Kirigan.

‘What is it? Have you spotted anything?’

‘Yes,’ you *idiot*, that you have to *ask*, ‘that light. And Kostyk came back traumatised; looked like he saw a demon. What *happened*? Did fitting the amplifier work, or not? Is the General all right?’

Ivan’s face is stone, always stone, although...curious, that he’s blinking so much. ‘It worked. Starkov’s powers are properly amplified. As you saw.’

Think, think, like she really should have done before she dashed out into the night half undressed and without gloves. If anything has gone wrong then Ivan wouldn’t be out here keeping watch, he’d be in there by Kirigan’s side, so he must be telling the truth. And yet, and yet! ‘Then why was Kostyk so afraid?’

‘Easily startled. *Durast*.’ As if that explains everything and anything, though before tonight she’d probably have accepted it. If Starkov’s eyes suddenly went all black again then she wouldn’t blame Kostyk one bit.

Ivan’s stone face gives her nothing, the same as when he tells the truth, or when he’s gauging whether others are lying. He isn’t going to give an inch or let her peer into Kirigan’s tent. He’ll stand here facing her forever if his general decrees it, not even caring enough to look fully at her freezing in the snow with her *kefta* gaping and her undershirt too thin for this cold. She’ll be damned if she buttons herself up under Ivan’s gaze.

It’ll sound fake but she still tries it - ‘Is *Starkov* all right?’

‘Wouldn’t think *you’d* care.’

There is a difference, Ivan, between not liking someone and not caring if something’s gone wrong with their eyes, or if they accidentally end up with an antler fused through their wrist bones.

‘Well. You know well as I, claiming an amplifier isn’t exactly *fun*. I just worry that she isn’t up to the job.’

‘No need for that. Starkov’s fine. As is the General.’ Ivan nods back to the other tent, the subordinates’ tent. ‘Get rested. We’ll start moving at first light.’

Between breath and breath Zoya considers calling a gale to put him on his back. She could bring the tent down on Kirigan and Starkov even if it is Corecoth, leave them to fight through the fabric and all the pretty objects the General *always* brings with him into the field. See how they like that.

Ivan will be watching her all the way back to the tent (the spare tent, the *leftover* tent) making sure she doesn’t try to find some way to sneak back and spy on Kirigan and Starkov. As if she’s that desperate! The way he is now, Kirigan might throttle her with his shadows before he even realised who she was. Now, at last, she pulls her *kefta* tight about her breast with her right hand.

She finds the tent already quieter and darker than she left it, with the lamps turned down low. Dmitri’s still seated by the unconscious Oretsev, now with hands gestured to keep his own heart alert and awake. He’ll be in for an uncomfortable night. Would be that the one who’s likely to get the most sleep is the man who was skewered through the guts not half an hour before!

Kostyk’s bundled up in his cot. Breathing far too quick to be asleep yet, but there’ll be no use in trying to get him to talk now. It can wait until the morning. She has permission to rest; there is a cot that should be at least moderately comfortable, even if she must set it up herself. She can at least try sleeping.

Of course her gut doesn’t let her rest for more than a few hours. Zoya wakes and dozes and lies there with her insides twisting. Her stomach sits as heavy as a stone.

*Please, please let me sleep, I need to be fully aware tomorrow, no, today, let me sleep!*

She positively refuses to think of Starkov and Kirigan. She squashes it every time. If she goes down that path it’ll only be more humiliation, more than just being rejected in a private study where no one saw, *thank saints*, no. More than running out into the snow with her *kefta* half hanging off her and her shift on full display, only to be fobbed off at the threshold and having to walk back alone and ridiculous. Saints, could they hear her from inside, were they laughing at her? No, no.

Burying her hot face in the cool pillow, she is not some bitter woman scorned, she is Grisha and Squaller, *she* killed her tiger and earned the scars fairly, no need for someone to kill it for her and fit it on her as a gift. Don’t think on it, don’t. Down that path lies madness.

Something is wrong. It keeps coming back to her, rising ever harder when she tries to push it away and soothe her stomach. It feels like the eve of a battle. Like the nights before she has to take ships through the Fold. Something is wrong, the air is heavy, it’s too hot, Zoya can’t breathe.

When daylight begins slicing through the tent she surrenders and gets up to start the samovar, to have the first use of the hot water in the washhouse, even if there's no time or room for a proper rinse.

Zoya knows she didn't take too long, but Dmitri fair barrels straight into the washhouse after she comes out, and even with the unfair male advantage he seems to be straight back out again before she's even poured herself a cup of tea! He nearly spills her cup while rushing past her. He yanks stumbling bleary Oretsev out of the tent...Oretsev, who does *not* get to use the washhouse, dragged to the treeline to relieve himself.

It's not a good thing, seeing just how a Ravkan soldier becomes a prisoner. *There's* a piece of irony! Zoya was there when Starkov was elevated from soldier to Grisha, she's here now Oretsev is reduced to prisoner and Starkov's been placed further and higher above him than the, hah, the *sun*.

Because she can't imagine Kirigan or Ivan thinking about feeding him, because it'll annoy them, because he'll be parched after having been healed and kept unconscious the whole night, Zoya pours tea for Oretsev after she's finished her own cup. She wants him treated the way she'd want any First Army soldier to be handled if they were in enemy hands. Dmitri of course isn't happy, but if Zoya Nazyalensky gets close to the prisoner - the official, acknowledged prisoner- to give him tea, is *he* going to tell her what to do? He is not.

Oretsev bows his head over the cup in relief and maybe in thanks. He doesn't appear to recognise her. Not very flattering, but then a lot has happened since they last met.

Pulling her gloves tighter onto her hands, Zoya gives him a reminder. 'I *did* warn you about stealing from Grisha.'

He looks up at that – *now*, he knows her! Thank goodness he managed to swallow that first gulp, otherwise he'd be dribbling it all down his front. He manages to grin without looking too sick. 'Don't suppose you'll throw me in the brigg for a week?'

'Doubt it.'

He snorts for show, swigs half the cup, sighs, gets straight to the point: 'Is Alina all right?'

'I presume so. Kirigan's been keeping her close all night.'

Of course he drops the cup and steps towards the main tent. Zoya sees Dmitri readying his hands. One tap of her fingers to her palm blows Oretsev backwards off his feet to land hard on the ground, though not quite flat on his back. '*Easy*, soldier.' She keeps her hands in position if he should want to try it again. 'Or the General might get angry and have Dmitri open you back up.' Though Dmitri had *better* know she means nothing of the sort. She's the greater authority here for the moment, *Heartrender*; she has this under control.

Oretsev gets back to his feet while puffing and blowing in a temper. Ah, he's angry at her, furious at Kirigan, likely enraged with himself. He's going to get skewered *again* if he carries on like this. '*Listen* to me, Oretsev. You're no good to her dead.' He goes quite still and

staring. Good, one way to make him pay attention! ‘You want to stay alive? Be penitent. Stay away from her. Keep your eyes off her, and Kirigan will be more inclined to mercy.’

Oretsev’s face crumples, *he* crumples, he curls in on himself. What’s that about? There’s a gasp that sounds like he’s staving off tears. ‘I can’t do that. I can’t just look away.’

‘Is she really worth it? All this?’

He looks at her like she’s said something idiotic or criminal. Doesn’t seem to think it warrants an answer, arrogant sod. Lovesick fool. It’s itching and irritating that she even *cares*. Why does she bother about another besotted man, mooning over Alina **bloody** Starkov?

Well.

Because Oretsev *did* something with that obsession other than brooding and fretting, or dressing her up and trotting her about like a pet. He went up into the permafrost to find a creature from a fairy tale, tramped all the way to Os Alta not for any reward but for the chance to see her again, and then followed her on her misguided trip back into the ice. Protecting and helping her. Crawling to her, even when pierced with an arrow.

Kirigan called it adorable in a tone that would wither flowers. Zoya would call it daft, but also – admirable. Loyalty. Devotion. Quite bizarre, they’d both laugh if Zoya ever told her about it, but nevertheless; Oretsev is quite like Aunt Liliyana, giving *so* much to get them to Os Alta and the Little Palace, saving her and helping her to a true new life, asking absolutely nothing in return.

But if he doesn’t want to hear her advice, if he isn’t as smart and savvy as Liliyana, fine. She’ll feel a touch of sorrow and pity for him, when Kirigan eventually loses his patience and the struggle with his jealousy (he will, she knows he will) but Zoya’s done her best and all that could be expected of her. Oretsev’s fate is now up to him.

The door of the washroom moves and there’s Kostyk, finally tired of pretending to sleep, sneaking about getting washed while none of them were looking. ‘Hi,’ he says once he gets within a foot or so of them, before proceeding to watch the trees and the sky overhead. Likely he only came over because Zoya’s the person he feels safest with, the most familiar face among them all. Isn’t *that* a curious and unwelcome feeling.

Oretsev turns on Kostyk now. ‘Have *you* seen Alina?’

Kostyk inhales hard, deciding something. ‘Yes.’ Oh, so he’s willing to talk to the prisoner!

‘Where is she, is she all right?’ Zoya gets her hands ready to blow Oretsev to the ground once more. Kostyk, with less martial options, takes several steps back.

‘She is. Well. She was when I left her last night.’

‘Oh, saints.’ Oretsev touches his fingers to his lips, his forehead. He really does care so much, poor idiot. Kirigan’s *never* going to let Starkov out of his sight and hold again, not after the scare she gave him. Not after she made such a fool of him. Starkov makes fools of a

lot of people. This one; Kirigan; that Conductor who thought he'd netted himself an easy million kruge. And General Zlatan across the Fold is a truly colossal fool, Kirigan will surely make him pay.

Oretsev tries again: 'The General wanted the antlers, they're powerful. What's he been doing to her?'

There, again, is the sick feeling, like they're all on the edge of heading into battle. 'Giving her a gift she doesn't deserve. What do you *imagine* he's been doing?' Oretsev really thinks Kirigan would hurt his precious Sun Summoner? The General can be passionate and Starkov clearly has him crazed at present, but he's not a sadist in his affairs *or* his bed, particularly when a person has made it clear they don't want him at present.

And yet, and yet, Oretsev sounds scared and it's *all* for Starkov. This man has defied the Black General, Kirigan only let him live because he'd given his word to Starkov and *still* Oretsev's only thinking of her!

Zoya wants to ask, she will ask – but here comes Ivan very fast, telling Oretsev 'Come' and taking him by the collar so he's half throttled. With Dmitri scampering behind they all set off down towards where the horses are being prepared. Kirigan clearly wants his rival well stashed away by the time he brings Starkov out.

That leaves the two of them, Kostyk twisting his fingers and his feet, Zoya waiting for the storm to break.

No Dmitri, no Ivan and no Kirigan. When will there be another chance? 'Kostyk. Just *tell* me. What happened with the amplifier?'

Kostyk breathes quick, shallow and on the cusp of panicking. If he isn't speaking *now*, it's because Kirigan or Ivan might have forbidden him from saying anything. Zoya could *make* him talk, but if the General and his Heartrender guess at her interrogating the Durast, or see him fearful and babbling, they'll never tell her anything.

Kostyk's breathing slows and calms. Once he settles down, he even tries to start a new conversation. 'The General has said I'm to go to Kribirsk.' What could Kirigan *possibly* want Kostyk to do in Kribirsk? Zoya has to focus on the sky above the main tent so she won't stare at him, she might make him wither and dry up. 'The General has a job for me.' Of course Kirigan will have drummed into him that he can't say what the job *is*. 'I think we'll all be going.'

*She'd* thought they would all head back to the Little Palace, so Kirigan can keep his Sun Summoner locked up all nice until it's time to trot her out again for another show. If it's Kribirsk they're going to - they'll be heading into the Fold. Starkov can make full amends for her flight, for leaving them all in peril...

...which *doesn't* answer the question of why Kirigan still wants Kostyk. What else is there for him to do, with the amplifier complete?

Back comes Ivan, stamping about and beckoning for Kostyk to start taking down the tents. All right, one other good reason to bring a Durast along. Think of trying to put up and take down these tents like *otkazat'sya* do!

They're short on hands. Zoya falls back to the old routines of helping to lift the cots, pack up the samovar and cups and bedding, arrange everything on the sled to go down to the carriages. Anything to make sure Ivan doesn't feel the need to watch her, anything to make it look as if she's too busy to be thinking about the events of last night. She finds herself leaning on the sled to watch Kostyk work his power on their tent, as if some invisible giant pair of hands are folding it up like a box, a piece of paper, a map.

Once all is finished and packed up he sighs, as if he'd taken a long deep drink of cool water. Zoya finds that she's happy to nod to him, one expert to another. Wonder of wonders, the Durast actually smiles for her, at her...until he looks beyond and behind her, pointing at something.

As Kostyk hurries past her, Zoya watches the packed tent as long as she can before she becomes insolent. Right. Time to watch Kirigan lead Starkov out into the world like a high court lady. A Grand Duchess.

Zoya in her blues and Ivan in his reds and Kostyk in purple, all of them moving towards Kirigan in black and Starkov in, *hah*, still wrapped in grey. Oh, and as Zoya gets closer she can see how Kirigan's lips are tight, all of him taut, so frustrated. How angry Kirigan still is with his pet! Good. Let that ruin his satisfaction in her, let it hurt and fester.

Starkov's at least walking on her own feet with dignity, Kirigan doesn't have to pull her along or hold her up. What place on her body did she pick for the antlers? Should have gone for the wrists, closest to the hands so the power doesn't have too far to travel...but.

But Zoya can't spot anything on Starkov's left wrist, flashing at her breast as she holds the scarf about her neck. Not at her right either, rising higher as Kirigan leads her along. Did she put them further up on her arms?

Starkov's clutching that scarf about her head very tight, even in this cold. Did Kirigan put it around her *neck*?

Why think that? Why would it be Kirigan's choice, when it's Starkov's amplifier?

Though, really think of it; around Starkov's throat like a necklace. A collar. A reprimand, not a reward, a punishment. A leash?

Zoya has to see. She comes as near as she dares, surely even Kirigan wouldn't mind her coming this close. Oh no, it's *Starkov* who stops dead – and then steps back and tries to go further, straining against his grasping hand. She looks, she really does look like a spooked horse. Zoya can see the whites of her eyes. She can hear and feel the air rushing in and out of those flared nostrils.

There's a stink of wet *living* fur, like some great animal near pressing itself against Zoya's face.

Starkov squeezes those eyes shut and shakes her head – actually *shakes* it, as if she thinks her neck's longer than it actually is, as if she's shaking something off herself rather than denying something.

'*Tiger?*' Starkov says, and answers herself, 'Tiger, I told you so.' She sniffs in Zoya's direction. Zoya thinks of nothing now but a deer, scenting the air. '*Storm.*'

## Chapter End Notes

Was anyone else amused by the highly elaborate set dressing in Kirigan's tent during 'The Unsea'? Here I was thinking 'You SERIOUSLY lugged all that stuff up into the permafrost while looking for Alina and the Stag? And where did you PUT it all? That is some dedicated glamping.'

Thus, one reason to keep a Durast around; they're the only ones who are able to get the tent back into the bag!

The show gives us nothing about Zoya's family other than that they exist, so I'm going with the information we were given in 'King of Scars'. Prove me wrong, Season 2.  
BECAUSE WE'RE GETTING A SECOND SEASON!!!



# Alina II

## Chapter Summary

Alina tries to get a grip.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ivan, the great ugly bear, tells Alina that ‘Any trouble from you, the tracker comes down off the horse and will be dragged along behind us.’

‘No, Ivan.’ So speaks Aleksander from far above their heads, already mounted. ‘No need for that. Miss Starkov has given her word, and there should be no cause on our part for her to break it.’

Alina nods for him and his growling pet bear. Something’s at her left temple once again, simply pressing now instead of drumming. There’s a tickle over the skin that doesn’t feel like her own crusty hair - more like eyelashes fluttering. She feels like her head might break free and topple off her neck if she moves it the wrong way, as if she were drunk on something, yet there’s no pain.

Oh, Mal, look at him. Surrounded by their enemies and he’d leap off the horse and get to her if only his hands weren’t tied to the saddle horn. She won’t give them one reason to hurt him. If they hurt him!

A greater huff of air returns to the cold outside her nose than Alina remembers taking in. *A good choice. He’s worth it.*

The fluttering fades, the top-heavy feeling in her head goes, Alina doesn’t trust it. It’s like a headache going away once Ana Kuya *finally* relented and allowed her a sip of poppy milk, but always with the possibility that it would come back *worse* once the poppy wore off.

Would Ivan throw her over a horse’s back and bind her wrists to her ankles, to keep her in place? That’s what a human hunter does with a slaughtered deer, like the Duke does when he comes back from hunts in Keramzin. Ivan would want to do it. He dislikes Mal but he hates *her* right now. He’s so loyal and Aleksander’s been plotting so long that Ivan must have been part of his dream. Somehow she’s spoiled that dream, and bears don’t like being woken up from winter slumber.

Ivan only pushes Alina to the stirrup and, thanks to the new cuffs they locked her up in, he even has to give her a boost. Swinging her leg up and over is when she thinks *what if the horse doesn’t want her*, whatever she now is, *sitting on its back*? Horses will shy and kick at a

shadow, let alone a woman with something drumming in her brain, feeling like her head will snap off with one wrong move. Can they smell it on her?

They happily still let a bear walk amongst them, though. One of them just let Zoya, a tiger, climb on its back and fret about atop it. Aleksander's horse carries *him* when there's merzost roiling beneath his skin and he could turn it into another volcra with a pat. They can't object to *her*!

Alina grabs for the saddle horn one handed in case the creature bucks or tries to bolt. She finds her seat and ah, it's good. The world is coloured all wrong but the shape of it looks nearly right again. Muscles shifting beneath her haunches like her old ***her own*** body. The horse doesn't even seem to notice her! If she keeps her head up and the other beast keeps its own head low, then it might as well not even be there! These legs can be hers, all four, her heart beating strong in her chest, between her legs, in their chest again, she'll run

careful! ***Careful!***

She is here, she is herself, she is exactly herself. She has two legs. Between them is another creature that she'll soon leave behind. The muscles, the legs and heart that she's thinking of were burned on Kirigan's order, they're nothing except charred sticks and lumps. They will be left behind as a scar upon this place, forever.

Thank saints these new stocks let her wipe her eyes. Less chance of being sticky and sore - but Mal might have spotted! Alina twists about in the saddle to smile for him and oh, he's already leaned forward mouthing *'It's all right, it's going to be all right.'* Saints only know if it is, or will be.

Aleksander calls for Ivan to 'ride with Miss Starkov.' Everything is growing noisy with the horses raring to go, even in the company of a bear, a tiger, whatever Alina is now and a man with abomination running through him instead of blood.

While Ivan's mounting up and everyone, even Mal, is looking to Aleksander, Alina looks past Mal and Zoya to the path they all came down. Somewhere up the mountain - she might even know the way, even in the dark - is the clearing where those blackened bits of flesh and bone lie, good for nothing, unable to return to the ground or feed anything once Aleksander took his cut, rejected, abandoned. Here's another black scar on the map, here's the true abandoned *otkazat'sya*!

A yank on her hands. Ivan, pulling her around to face front. 'Look *forward*.'

Alina should tell Ivan 'You're a *rotten* bear' to get him gaping all wide eyed. She should tell him that a *true* bear would eat its fill and not waste the kill; it would leave a share for every creature that comes after it. She should yell at Aleksander's back, nearly out of sight beneath the black pelt that he surely didn't hunt and win for himself, 'A true hunter uses every bit of the kill that they can, and gives the rest back to the earth and the world. You're just ***greedy***.'

The stag is far beyond her. Mal is nearer

*and dearer, for you did choose him,*

so Alina says nothing.

*Keep moving forward, little one. Silent, and always a moving target. Keep moving.*

---

This is how Alina would describe that day's ride to Mal, if Dmitri didn't pull him off the horse as soon as the party stopped for the evening, and dragged him so far away they couldn't even shout to each other:

Every way that I looked, I saw everything new. I didn't know every single rock and ridge we passed by, but I knew most of the trees – this one missing a branch, that one with a newly sprouting growth, an old one dying and a young one surviving the snows. I knew trees that I'd seen grow from shoots that I didn't eat when I chewed up others like them, I ate the bark from off their flesh, I scraped my hide and head against them. I saw life I'd seen thousands of times before, that I was seeing for the first time, that I'll never see again.

I promised myself again and again: I shall return, I shall return again. I told myself in return, first I must deal with the journey ahead before I thought of returning, and that the tiger could help; you and Zoya probably heard me say 'The tiger will *not!*' I hope you don't think I'm cracked in the head. Zoya likely does. She'll never help me now.

Ivan might as well not have bound my hands, because every little while I completely forget what they were and stared at them. I was terrified that some branch had trapped my front legs and some beast had shredded them to pieces with no pain, and the shreds moved by themselves! And I would forget my two legs and try to move my four legs faster to outpace Ivan, not understanding why they wouldn't obey; you surely heard me whining in frustration! Then I would remember and resolve not to forget this time, and always after a few hundred heartbeats I'd be confused and frightened once again. If I get a moment alone, I must explain fingers and hands, and how important it is to get them free.

Whenever I remembered Marie, *oh Marie!* and the poor stag, and the pain clawed up my throat 'til I couldn't breathe, there was the feeling of warm hair about my head to hide my face, there was a weight on my shoulder that only comforted, there was a warm wet breath over my heart. I'm not alone and I wish I could have shared it with you, that comfort and help.

Whenever I turned around to look at you, Mal, I kept returning to this: was my choice worth it? And I'm sorry for that, but you saw the stag living and dead, you must wonder that too! And every time I knew that it *was* worth it, that you and I lived, that I was moving forward, and I felt the stag's approval. For it likes you! It doesn't mind that you would have shot it, truly. You really would have done very little. Sorry. Not really, but. You know.

Mal. Whenever I looked at Aleksander, *Kirigan*, expecting to feel the stag's hate for him alongside mine, there was only bone deep satisfaction. I reached for that hate. I tried to summon it, in every way that I've learned to call my light. And - nothing. It doesn't hate him

after his pack brought it down or after he killed it, or after he ordered its total destruction by burning the body. Not even after he tried to use pieces of it for himself when it had already chosen me.

And I thought: Kirigan has chased and trapped me, he's hurt me, but he hasn't wounded me enough to bring me down. He meant to collar me, and he might still find some way to do it, but in some way the stag wrecked his plans and that is a joy. The stag doesn't hate him, but it doesn't need to hate its foe in order to fight it to the death. We will have horns in time, for new battles.

The stag is here, in my head, beating in my left temple. I don't know how or why. I don't know how it survived. I don't know if it *did* survive, I don't know if it knows either. I don't know what will happen now. I should be afraid. Should I be afraid? Is this what an amplifier does, is that why when I look at Ivan I see a great black bear scratching the ground and Zoya becomes a prowling snarling tiger? What do they see when they look at me?

What did you see looking at you through my eyes, when we were both bleeding in the snow?

The stag's here, Mal! It chose *me*!

## Chapter End Notes

Alina reaches across space and time to quote Claude McKay's 'I Shall Return'.

In the book the Darkling has the Stag's body burned after they take some of the antlers to make Morozova's Collar, making sure no one else could use it - and nothing else in the forest could feed from it. I thought that was a very good bit of imagery, and a good metaphor for the whole amplifier issue; honouring a hunted animal and using all the parts of it, or else giving anything you don't use back to nature, versus only taking your cut or hunting trophy and ruining the rest of the kill.

Ivan, of course has his amplifier made of Sherborn Bear claws, just as Zoya has her amplifier of tiger teeth.

Anyone ever have that moment when they wake up and wonder what these weird wiggly things on the end of their arms are? Pity poor Alina, who has to experience it several times in a row. The stag be most puzzled by fingers.

# Mal I

## Chapter Summary

Mal's second conversation with the Black General is enlightening and frustrating for both of them.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Kirigan strides into the tent Mal almost wants to ask him what in the name of Sankt Juris took him so bloody *long*. The big Heartrender follows right behind his general, oh, here we go. At least he's on his feet this time, and they're not going to kill him in front of Alina.

Cold in here. His fool body's pulling the blood out of his hands and feet to keep it all safe, just making a bigger target for the Heartrender to squeeze and pop. Heart beating much too fast and only speeding up, is the Grisha trying to make it burst inside him? Don't his hands need to touch before he works his power, did he make the gesture when he followed Kirigan inside?

The Heartrender moves to Mal's right while Kirigan stays in front of him. He has to look from one to the other with no way to choose which man is most deadly right now.

Mal knows this game. He's waited for the crack of a rifle and the smashing pain of a bullet hundreds of times, even with sweat pouring down his back and no feeling in his feet. He presses his teeth together for that deep awful pressure, breathes deep and slow, gives them nothing.

Will it be now? Or now? What if it's *now*?

No pain from in front of him or inside his chest. His heart slows a little. Finally, Kirigan sighs and speaks: 'You're not even going to demand that I tell you how Alina is? After you begged it from everyone else?'

Mal feels his shirt clinging all damp to his back as he shrugs. 'Would you tell me if I *did* ask?'

Kirigan shrugs in kind. 'Turnabout is fair play. You didn't tell *me* where the stag was.'

'I gave you a rough idea.'

'If you had simply told me outright, you would have been handsomely rewarded and sent on your way, rather than being hunted down and shot.'

*Or* he would have ended up dead regardless once he was out of sight and mind, courtesy of Kirigan's mother. Alina might never have known what happened to him or that he was ever there at all. Saints, what will they tell her after tonight? 'Well. You here to finish the job? Once more, for luck?'

Perhaps *once more* confuses Kirigan, his eyes narrow and squint. 'How many times must I tell people? I'm a man of my word.'

'So? You said that you'd have me healed. Doesn't stop you or your Heartrender from doing anything *after* that.'

The bastard smiles. 'True.'

Mal waits for the pain and the dark. A fist squeezing inside his chest again, or Kirigan making a gesture to slice sharp through his neck? They'll likely tell Alina that he was sent on ahead of her and they'll dump his body to be swallowed by the forest and the winter.

Nothing. Nothing and nothing, from every corner of the tent there's nothing, his heart hammers but never quite painful. Another breath. Is this the last breath? Is it now? Will it be now? Why do they make him wait and *wait*? Is it now?

'Where is Morozova's Stag?'

Oh. Oh, careful now, be careful. Be nothing but confused. 'Burned to ashes? Way back up the trail.'

'Ivan.' Out of the corner of Mal's eye the red draws nearer - but the Heartrender, Ivan, his arms don't seem to be raised to call his power. Kirigan is on the move, putting his arms behind his back like Lieutenant Bohdan during one of his speeches. 'Let's try this again. Where is Morozova's Stag?'

Mal braces again for agony. 'You *killed* it. Why are you asking this?'

'*Try* for it, Malyen Oretsev.'

He can't know. Mal can't let him know. And it's not really truly real, it's just that all the blood he's lost on this whole mad quest has finally drained his brain, or the Heartrenders twisted something inside him while they were fixing the damage they did. That's surely why Mal feels *thinks he feels* that strange pull and that trilling sound, which still hasn't stopped throughout a whole day's worth of riding.

The stag was dead. Its head was off, antlers every which way. It was definitely dead. So why does he still feel it, not too far off to the left of him, quiet and resting?

'It's *dead*.' He tries to meet Kirigan's eye and see how he reacts to that. He can't do it because Kirigan isn't looking at him, he's looking to Mal's left. Shit. He gave it away somehow –

– because he *looked back* to Kirigan, the man saw him look!

‘He lies.’ Look at Ivan, all smug with his hands folded in front of him, like he’s attending a church service. ‘He knows it isn’t dead, he knows it’s close.’

Kirigan sighs, so pleased. ‘No ordinary tracker.’ He sounds like he’s eaten something good or taken a long, cool drink.

Well. If the secret’s out, if Kirigan isn’t charging straight out of the tent, if he’s confirmed a suspicion and not discovered something he didn’t expect... ‘What is this, Kirigan?’

‘Quite unexpected on my part, I assure you.’ Kirigan pauses, sighs, looks away to Mal’s left and towards *her*. ‘To put it bluntly, and as Alina takes great delight in reminding me, the stag chose her.’

And *he* sounds far too pleased by it. ‘What does that mean?’

‘It means that Alina is now sharing her mind with a confused, frightened and enraged beast.’

Mal waits for Kirigan to mock him with a smile, maybe some amusement of how the pitiful tracker honestly believed that.

Kirigan stares back at him, nothing more. Oh. He *believes* what he just said. That’s, that’s. ‘You’re mad.’

‘You are drawn to them. They are *one*. Do you doubt your own senses?’

After getting a poker through the shoulder, spending days and nights in the freezing cold, an arrow through the gut, being squeezed like an egg and getting his insides unscrambled? Mal truly doesn’t know any longer. Mad, it’s madness. Grisha bullshit and lies!

There was that moment. When Alina got to her feet, after the stag was killed. She looked as if she’d eat or trample him!

*Sankt Juris*. Mal should never have seen that bloody picture of the beast or volunteered his fool self. Alina could have been across the Fold by now, if he hadn’t distracted her with his find. Or she could have stayed in the Little Palace with all the Grisha and Kirigan would still be desperate to find the stag but with no clue where to start looking. Mikhael, Dubrov, they’d be alive. All would be fine, except that Mal would never have seen her again. Would it be worth it?

Think about it later! What matters now is this: ‘*If*, if the stag’s in Alina now, what will you do to her? Will you want her bones?’

Kirigan’s anger from a distance while focused on someone else, that was frightening. Standing this close, even as the shadows start boiling up like the heat Alina summoned, Mal can see how pale the man turns and how deeply he breathes to keep any kind of control over himself. ‘You think that I’d harm her?’

‘You killed the stag for its power and you want to use her, so, *yes*.’ Mal rises above the sickness and the drumming of his heart, he sails on the joy of actually scoring a hit on the

general, look at his *face!* ‘You hurt her, I’ll take *your* head and claim the bounty the old king put on it.’ He says this last bit extra loud for Ivan: ‘Black Heretic.’

Kirigan only tilts his head as if he’s heard some kind of ridiculous excuse from one of his own soldiers. No sudden move from Ivan or any sort of gasp, the Heartrender’s face is quite blank. At least one of Kirigan’s people knows his secret. Do the rest of them know as well? Does Zoya?

‘Are you really *so* eager to die?’ Kirigan sounds honestly curious. His hands might be touching behind his back right now and it will finally be a sharp end for Mal, not a crushing cracking one.

So long ago this morning, Zoya said, *Is she worth it?* She said *You’re no good to her dead.* Just like Mikhail reminded him, no good to anyone if he was hanged for desertion.

Remember, remember, it’s not just the two of them against the world any longer. Right now all of *Ravka’s* at risk, East and West. It’s Mikhail and Dubrov’s families and Dubrov’s girl back home; she might never even know what happened to her lover, any more than Alina would know what happened to Mal if he gets himself killed now. It’s so many others, like Alina’s parents eaten by the Fold, or Ana Kuya trying to prepare children to inherit the hell that wars have made of their country. Hell, it’s the First *and* the Second Armies, everyone that the king or Kirigan or Zlatan in the West might be preparing to spend like so many coins.

Mikhail and Zoya both spoke it right, Mal’s no use dead to Alina *or* Ravka dead. Stand back. Stand down. Let Kirigan see that he’s cowed, he’s beaten down and no threat. Fold his free hand over his manacled one and face the enemy head on, then look down. Just another parade to endure.

His withdrawal seems to please Kirigan; the man lowers his head so that he doesn’t look down on Mal so much, his hands come back into view but stay by his sides.

Mal’s heart slows and slows while he meets Kirigan’s eye.

He did think he might be able to spot something lacking in the Black General, that it might be like Koschei the Deathless; there’d be an emptiness behind the man’s eyes like he’d scooped out his death or his soul, just like Koschei, and hidden it in a needle, an egg, a duck, a hare, a chest. Looking at him would make someone sense that something was missing, gone or lost, withered away or severed and cast far off.

Well, goes to show how wrong he was. Not something missing but something *more*. Now that he knows to look for it, he can see the life upon life upon life layered inside Kirigan, a heavy thick hide of centuries, all the years squashed together and staring at him through just one set of eyes.

Now, if only he could grab someone by the collar and explain all that without sounding like a lunatic *and* be believed, they’ll all be saved.



## Chapter End Notes

Mr. Oretsev and General Kirigan would NOT cooperate during the construction of this chapter. Ivan mostly just stood in the background and wished desperately to be allowed to leave. Not on your life, Ivan.

Spot the moment where Mal unwittingly REALLY pushes Kirigan's buttons!

Koschei the Deathless is a common anti-hero in east-Slavic folktales, whose typical feature is that he hides his soul inside an egg, and then hides that egg inside further hiding places, including different animals. Go read Catherynne M. Valente's 'Deathless' for a really interesting retelling of the story 'The Death of Koschei the Deathless' and Koschei's relationship with Marya Morevna. There's an Ivan in that book too! Then again, there's an Ivan everywhere in Russian folktales...

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